DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 186 000 IR 008 332

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TITLE Social Science Data Bases and Data Banks in the Nordic Countries.
PUB DATE Aug 79
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Conference of the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (45th, Copenhagen, Denmark, August 27-September 1, 1979).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Data Bases; Foreign Countries; *Information Services; International Programs; Policy Formation; *Social Sciences
IDENTIFIERS *Scandinavia

ABSTRACT

The author's comments and questions about an earlier study by NORDINFO (Nordic Council for Scientific Information) of databases and data banks in Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden are organized into four sections: (1) surveying databases and data banks, (2) approaches to computerized information services, (3) the present state of development in social science databases and data banks, and (4) a brief conclusion. (JD)

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SOCIAL SCIENCE DATA BASES AND DATA BANKS IN THE NORDIC COUNTRIES

by

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Social Science Data Bases and Data Banks in the Nordic Countries

by

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1. Surveying data bases and data banks

NORDINFO (The Nordic Council for Scientific Information) initiated in 1977 a study of data bases and data banks in the four Nordic countries Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden. The fifth of the Nordic countries, Iceland, which participates in NORDINFO activities has not been included in this study. A project group was set up, and in 1978 a survey using questionairies was carried out. Early this year a report to NORDINFO was submitted. One aim was to improve the basis for decision making. NORDINFO gives financial support to research libraries, research institutes and project groups that want to improve the availability of scientific and technical information in the Nordic countries. This aim has undoubtedly been achieved,

since the survey produced firstly a vast amount of details on almost 500 data bases and data banks of all kinds. Secondly because it includes a considerable number of data bases and data banks - particularly among the some 70 in the field of social sciences - which are not usually regarded as scientific and technical information. In the course of the survey this extension of coverage appeared necessary because it was felt that NORDINFO should pay attention to more than bibliographic data bases. But where to stop the extension became an open question.

Another aim of the study was to evaluate the data bases and data banks, particularly those which could be made available to all Nordic users of on line information services. Some of these should then be helped by NORDINFO in connecting with the Nordic packet switched data net SCANNET. This evaluation was not achieved because the project group did not find itself qualified to compare and rank the data bases and data banks. In most cases assessment of user needs, technical gaps and financial requirements would also be quite time consuming.

A third aim, which is of interest to librarians and documentalists, was to prepare an inventory of the material. This has been done in the report to NORDINFO. But its value as a directory is quite limited mainly because the project group was not able to draw up precise definitions of the material to be included. Today it is uncertain whether a useful directory can be produced.

I think it is relevant for social science information specialists to notice the experiences of NORDINFO, even though many other subject fields were included in the study. Firstly it is interesting that the survey generated information on so many materials within the social sciences. Actually the representation of social sciences - only counting the numbers of respondents - was greater than in directories of on line bibliographic data bases. The social sciences are not only large consumers (and producers) of machine readable data. They are in

the Nordic countries also aware of the possibilities for increasing the availability of this information and data.

Secondly I hope that the inability of the NORDINFO project group to clear the boarder lines between different types of data bases and data banks will be taken by information specialists as an invitation to consider the possible need for development and extension of present information services in the social sciences. I will return to this in the remainder of the paper.

Lastly, it may be advisable to many of you to investigate further the possibilities for obtaining support from NORDINFO to such further development. Admittedly NORDINFO supports only Nordic projects. However, wider international cooperation on for example making Nordic information and data available in international information services is also of interest to NORDINFO.

2. Approaches to computerized information services

NORDINFO's study briefly examined above gives us valuable insight in the present state of social science data bases and data banks. But as mentioned, it is not likely to be a useful tool in library services as it stands now. At the present juncture I will suggest that we look at our topic not as a metter to be surveyed and put into different categories but as a phenomenon to be related to social sciences in general.

Consider two approaches to computerized information services in the social sciences:

A

- Social science literature and data consist of 1) literature published as documentation of research activities, 2) statistical and other hard data produced for administrative and other purposes and 3) archival material.

- Computerized information systems processing this literature and data supplement other, more traditional information services.

B

- Social and economic development leads societies from primarily agrarian activities via industrialization to primarily service producing activities.
- Technological advances make it feasible to handle and communicate large quantities of information and data.
- Computerized information systems increase the possibilities for putting the information and data to serve desirable ends.

The first approach places the data bases and data banks as something the existing information infrastructure in the social sciences can utilize and benefit from, if those responsible choose to do so. The other approach is much broader. It emphasizes the subject matter of social sciences and places data bases and data banks as an integral part of social and economic development. The two approaches are not presented as alternatives, indeed, many would probably agree that both are relevant. But it is my experience from the field of policy making for scientific and technical information that the relative weight attached to them has implications for the policies and strategies. It is my proposition that we ought to examine our basic assumptions at frequent intervals during the development of social science data bases and data banks.

3. What is the present state of development in social science data bases and data banks?

It is not possible to make a detailed examination of the present situation for Nordic social science data bases and data banks. Even though considerable material is available it would have to be analyzed critically by a highly experienced person, and it

would be a rather large task. The NORDINFO study indicates that a state of the art report on this subject would be a very useful input to further support of the field.

One of the questions needing examination is the problem of definitions. What is social science data bases and data banks? Seen from "approach A" above this is important to libraries and operational information systems. They need better definitions of concepts when planning for future mix of services. Looking at the question from the more general "approach B" will also be useful. The role of computerized information systems in social and economic development is increasingly becoming the concern nationally and internationally.

Librarians and documentalists may be well advised in considering what data bases and data banks to include in their sphere of interest from this approach too. Assistance to researchers handling increasing amounts of data is not only a matter of bigger and bigger computers. Among other things it is perhaps also a matter of information specialists in libraries, where the capability of information storage and retrieval has been developed along different paths.

Secondly the production of data for the social sciences ought to be considered. This is the raw material for data bases and data banks. Who are the producers of data? Or rather, with what purpose and aim are data generated? Most of the data are certainly not generated for scientific purposes. Traditionally many for example administratively produced statistical data have been made available to researchers in the form of printed materials. The libraries have experience in facilitating the access to these sources. But as researchers in social sciences now are capable of handling large computer programs for calculations of machine readable primary data, we see a growing need for making more such data available. Many problems have to be solved if we want to make this vast amount of data easily accessible fields of research. In effect what is going to happen if such access is achieved, is a short circuiting

of administrative procedures in government agencies, in statistical bureaus, in private companies and in other organizations producing data and information for their own needs. Questions which quite reasonably can be asked are: In what fields do we want research? What social problems are so important that more data shall be made accessible to the researchers? And beyond the researchers we find other user groups. Education, public policy making, public and private planning are the most obvious sectors presently employing personnel qualified for utilizing machine readable data generated for administrative purposes in other sectors. As the NORDINFO survey has shown data bases and data banks are in many organizations utilized for in house purposes. They constitute a potential growth area for social science libraries' computerized information services.

As a third problem that could be considered, when one looks at the present situation, I will point to the data that are not collected and stored, but nevertheless may be important to the understanding of social, political and economic development. As in earlier times much of the important societal information on for example public decision making is not even put on record. It has to be guessed at by the researchers analyzing otherwise available data. Never is full knowledge of history to be achieved. But it seems to be a fair assumption that today much more information of all types is communicated to many more people than previously. This is the so called information society - more dramatically seen as responsible for paralyzing society in a state of shock, the future shock - and it may well be more complicated to analyze by future researchers, since much more information carries an impact on the critical events. What was, to take an example, the political effect of daily broadcasting of television reports from the battle fields in Vietnam in the early seventies? Or what was the role of cassette tape recording in the recent Islamic revolution in Iran? And less dramatically, what are the executive boards of multinational companies going

to do, when their management information is submitted daily via electronic mail in quantities today received only weekly or monthly by telegrams and air mail?

Well, do these problem areas have anything to do with social science libraries today? Perhaps in a conventional way of thinking, they have something to do with the acquisition of library materials. A critical analysis of social science data bases and data banks, their potential value to researchers and other users, their accessability etc. is necessary. Then libraries can ask themselves if they shall move into the business of handling information in these growth areas.

4. Conclusion

This has been a presentation of some thoughts which have occurred to me looking at the material from the NORDINFO study on data bases and data banks in the Nordic countries. The point of view has been that of policy making for information and documentation with the general issues predominating. It will be in the interest of such policy making that the librarians of the social sciences articulate themselves on what they see as their role in the future. The future will bring into operation information services based upon many types of data bases and data banks with all sorts of information. Leaving the questions of definitions aside, it is a challenging task for the libraries to make the relevant portion of these information sources available to researchers and other users. I propose that the social science libraries continue to examine their policies and strategies towards these data bases and data banks. Extension of service mix is a natural aim, and it should be persued in the framework of the general development of the social sciences.